Synopsis

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From Restlessness to Reassuring Humanism in the Select Novels of Perumal Murugan

By

Manjupriya S

19PHENF007

Supervisor

Dr. S. Kalamani

Department of English

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Language is the most primary tool of communication human beings have and literature escalates the purpose of language to the next level. From the beginning till now, the basic purposes of literature have been to: express one self, educate the masses, explore humanity, and provide entertainment and aesthetic pleasure. The base of literature is culture and it varies according to the nationality, race, customs, and traditions of people and so the purpose of literature changes according to the country and its historical background.

India, remarkable for its unity in diversity is a reservoir of artistic writings like scriptures, myths, and epics. Indian Literature dates back to 1500 BC and all the literary works were written in Indian languages like Tamil, Sanskrit, Urdu, Kannada, Malayalam, and Hindi, each language having its own uniqueness. Sangam Tamil Literature and Classical Sanskrit Literature are considered to be the foremost in the history of Indian literature. Literature in other languages came into vogue in the 11^{th} century.

The birth of Indian Literature in English can be traced back to 1700s. *Travels by Dean Mahomed* (1794), a travel narrative is the first book in English written by an Indian and *Rajmohan's* Wife (1864) by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee is the first novel in English. Though there are colonial influences in the writings, the themes were completely Indian. Indian Literature in English attained maturity under the care of luminaries like Bhabani Bhattacharya, G.V.Desani, Kushwant Singh, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K.Narayan and, Aurobindo. With the arrival of modern writers like Vikram Seth, Arundhati Roy, Salman Rushdie, and Anita Desai, Indian Literature gained recognition in the world scenario. Tagore's *Gitanjali*, Mulk Raj

Anand's *The Untouchable*, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, R.K.Narayan's *The English Teacher*, Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* and Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, Kiran Desai's The *Inheritance of Loss* are considered milestones in the history of Indian English Literature. Culture, spirit of nationalism, freedom, gender issues, discrimination, and environmental concerns are the most prominent themes in Indian Literature.

The practices of untouchability, marginalisation and social inequality are prevalent in India and Southern Asia. Dalit Literature came into existence as a sub field in Indian Literature. Unlike other literatures, Dalit literature gained importance late because the dalits were denied education. It gained prominence when writers started translating literary works into English. Baburao Bagul's *When I Concealed my Caste* was appreciated as the 'epic of dalits.' Famous dalit writers include Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Jyotiba Phule, Namdeo Dhasal, Arjun Dangle, Mahasweta Devi, Mulk Raj Anand, and Bama.

Dalit Literature in Tamil originated in the 1990s.It had a late start compared to the other languages. It is still in the consummating stage. In the 1960s and 70s only a handful of writers mentioned about the lives of the dalits, but there was no Dalit consciousness or revolution. *Pazhayana Kazhidhalum*(1989) by Sivakami is regarded as the first Dalit Novel in Tamil and it was later translated into English as *The Grip of Change*. Many other writers emerged as Dalit literature was explored and the dalits got exposed, expressed, enlightened and empowered. In contrast to literature on monarchs, and dominant social classes, dalit literature had the vulnerable as its subject. Initially, oppression and patriarchy were the main themes of Tamil Dalit Literature. With the passage of time, it started focussing on various issues like liberation, education, political equality, and social identity. Besides writers, many revolutionaries including

Periyar, Kakkan, Iyothee Thass, Rettamalai Srinivasan, and Immanuel Sekaran toiled tirelessly for the advancement of dalits. Notable Dalit writings in Tamil include, Bama's *Karukku*, Sivakami's *The Taming of Women*, Imayam's *Beasts of Burden*, Cho Dharman's *Sool*, Poomani's *Vekkai*, and Perumal Murugan's *Seasons of the Palm*.

Perumal Murugan, a well known Tamil writer from Namakkal is famous for his works, having the Kongu region of Tamil Nadu as their setting. He was born in 1966 in Tiruchengode. Murugan, who was raised in a farming community, has always been an avid reader from childhood. His father ran a soda shop in a theatre outside the village. His early memories of childhood with family and friends had a substantial impact on his writings.

Perumal Murugan is a literary chronicler. He began his writing career by writing poems and short stories for a journal called *Manavosai.* Murugan has to his credit, ten novels, five collections of short stories and poetry, and ten works of non-fiction. His works serve as the 'cultural map of Tamil Nadu.' His novel *Seasons of the Palm* was shortlisted for the Kiriyama Prize in 2005 and is praised as 'tour de force' by N. Kalyan Raman. His other remarkable works are *Current Show* (2004), *One Part Woman* (2010), *Pyre* (2016), *Poonachi: Or The Story of a Black Goat* (2016), *Songs of a Coward* (2017), *Lonely Harvest* (2018), *Trial by Silence* (2018), *Rising Heat* (2019), *Estuary* (2020), *Resolve* (2021), *Black Coffee in a Coconut Shell* (2017). He has researched on Kongu folklore, and deities of the region; but his creation of a dictionary of words, phrases, and idioms of Kongu belt is his greatest accomplishment. He is honoured with ILF Samanvay Bhasha Samman award by the India Habitat Centre for his excellent contribution to Indian Literature. The Tamil Nadu government also has bestowed on him many awards. *The Hindu* praises him as "A great literary chronicler . . . at the height of his creative Powers" and *The Guardian* refers to him as, "The Tamil Irvine Welsh." His works provided a vent to the

untold miseries of thousands of the untouchables who are in the clutches of patriarchy and social hegemony. Considering the need for humanity and the way writer Perumal Murugan works avidly for a casteless society, his seven novels are explored in the present study.

The present study "From Restlessness to Reassuring Humanism in the Select Novels of Perumal Murugan" is divided into five chapters including Introduction and Conclusion. The main chapters are, Chapter II: Cruelty in the Form of Caste, Chapter III: Empowered Versus Subdued Women, Chapter IV: Establishing Good Rapport for Life Enhancement

Primary Sources:

Novels selected for the study are the translated versions of the original novels written in Tamil,

1. *Koolamatari* (2000) translated by V.Geetha as *Seasons of the Palm* (2004)
2. *Nizhalmutram* (1993) translated by V.Geetha as *Current Show* (2004)
3. *Pookuzhi* (2013) translated by Aniruddhan Vasudevan as *Pyre* (2016)
4. *Poonachi Alladhu oru Vellatin Kadhai* (2016) translated by N. Kalyan Raman as *Poonachi: Or The Story of a Black Goat* (2017)
5. *Eru Veyil* (1991) translated by Janani Kannan as *Rising Heat* (2019)
6. *Kazhimugam* (2018) translated by Nandini Krishnan as *Estuary* (2020)
7. *Kanganam* (2008) translated by Aniruddhan Vasudevan as *Resolve* (2021)

Thesis Statement:

Marginalization in terms of caste, class, gender, and race is inhuman as it deprives people of their rights. This can be stopped when people realise their rights and set right their relationship with others, thus creating a better environment to live.

Objectives:

- To understand marginalization and Dalit consciousness.
- To bring out the problems of the suppressed to light.
- To examine the status of women characters portrayed in the novels.
- To emphasize the need for maintaining relationship with fellow human beings and nature

Research Methodology:

A few concepts and ideas related to Subaltern theory and Social Identity Theory are used in chapters II and III and to a smaller extent in chapter IV; The Concept of Humanism as given by H. J. Blackham is used in chapter IV.

MLA Handbook 9th Edition is used for References and Documentation.

Chapter I: Introduction gives an overview of the origin of the concept of untouchability, Dalit Literature, and writers contributing to Dalit Literature in Tamil. The notion of untouchability is believed to have come from *Manusmriti* and *Purusha Sukta*. Manu, with the varna system divides human beings based on their origin from Brahma into four varnas. One group of people who are excluded from the varna system are referred to as 'panchamas' and are regarded as untouchables. Though the division was meant to be based on work, it came to be a division of people. The hierarchy was conceived as propaganda and any idea or action disturbing the structure was deemed to be a terrific sin.

The untouchables are denied of all the rights and they have attempted all possible ways to come out of their inferred identity. With literature as a tool in hand, they shed light on their culture, ancestry, and struggle. The Dalit revolutionaries worked tirelessly for their advancement. With their support, the misconceptions about the community started to decrease and others who

remained ignorant of the other side of the society became aware of the social injustice. This type of suppression is common in other countries too. Caste system was formed in Japan during the feudal era. Even though it was officially abolished in 1871, there are still obstacles in the unity and integration in the social life of people. There are certain similarities in the caste system of almost all the countries.

Madara Chennaiah, a cobbler and saint who lived in the eleventh century and Dohara Kakkaiah are considered the foremost Dalit writers. Modern Dalit Literature originated in Marathi in 1960s with the establishment of Dalit Panthers, a revolutionary organisation founded by Namdeo Dhasal, Arjun Dangle, J.V.Pawar, and Raja Dhale to work for the upliftment of Dalits. Dalit Literature is generally seen as literature by Dalits. But it encompasses any piece of writing dealing with the particular community. Arjun Dangle in his *Poisoned Bread* points out the fifth resolution taken in the first conference of Dalit writers in 1958 regarding this: "The literature written by the Dalits and that written by others about the Dalits in Marathi be accepted as a separate entity known as Dalit Literature" (xxviii).This helped many others to express themselves through their writings. Dalit Literature is culture and location specific like Aboriginal Literature. It is an expression of the lives of the dalits, the oppression they undergo, the social alienation they are forced into, and ways for their empowerment. Dalit literature exposed them to the world and took them out of the darkness. This motivated writers from other parts of the country to come up with their experiences in other regional languages like Tamil, Malayalam, and Hindi.

From ancient folklore to the modern writings, the concerns of Dalit writers have been to voice out their sufferings and to point out the ways of liberation. Suraj Yengde in his article "Twelve books that form part of the arsenal of Dalit writing" says, "One of the solid arsenals

produced by the Dalit community, apart from its resolute commitment to love, forgive and fight, is the articulation, through literature, of human emotion, and writing about bodies and sexuality, compelling rage and justifiable challenges to authority." The introductory chapter also includes a Review of Literature and Murugan's place among the writers.

Chapter II: Cruelty in the Form of Caste deals with the practice of marginalization in Tamil Nadu. Though marginalization exists everywhere in India and other countries, the severity of the oppression varies according to the location. Cleaning of human excretion and depriving people of their education are more common in North India and bonded labour is common in South India. Hailing from an agricultural family, Murugan concentrates on the underprivileged like, poor farmers, goatherds, farmhands, field workers in the Kongu belt in his works. The region comprises some districts in the Western part of the state namely, Coimbatore, Tirupur, Erode, Salem, Namakkal, and Karur. His writings are primarily focused on Namakkal. Most of his works are set in rural areas with the ambience of green fields, barren, uncultivated lands, wells, and expansive pastures which serve as backdrop. The land becomes an observer, companion, and philosopher of people. Agriculture and cattle rearing are the main sources of income for these people. Murugan's protagonists who live their life in the pastures and fields are not much aware of what is happening in the world outside.

The significant issue prevalent in the area is Agricultural servitude – lower caste individuals bonded to a specific landlord in exchange for an annual monetary payment that may or may not include food. The landlords being of high caste suppress the labourers in whatever ways they can. They use them from dawn to dusk with all kinds of jobs like cleaning, taking care of cattle and, working in fields robbing them off their rights, voice to equality, and the privilege of leading even an ordinary life. The novel *Seasons of the Palm* is a very realistic portrayal of the

living conditions of children who are bonded in the farms of landlords. They receive all kinds of taunts like, "'Smells, does it? Is untouchable pee sweet-smelling by any chance? Fucker!'"(49). But the boy has to do the work regularly. The writer describes his condition: "Every morning, he wants to throw up. His stomach churns, his insides twist and turn and he feels as if his entire body is dripping with shit" (50).

Honour Killing is a curse of the region. Men and women who marry out of caste are brutally murdered and people belonging to lower castes are commonly victimized. Saroja, the lower caste woman is murdered by her mother-in-law for marrying her son in the novel *Pyre*. The mother-in-law, with the help of her relatives sets fire to the bush where Saroja is hiding, without any compassion for the pregnant girl. "This fire was coming to embrace her and release her from some terrible, freezing cold. She redied herself to welcome it with outstretched arms" (196). The concept of 'purity' is deeply ingrained in the region of Murugan.

Beyond these, the misuse of lower castes is the most pervasive problem in almost all societies. The untouchables who lack access to education and family support must work extremely hard to make both ends meet. Taking advantage of their situation, the higher classes exploit them. In *Current Show,* the boys in the theatre lack support from their families. The owner uses them to attack his neighbour as he does not have to pay more. The boys become scapegoats. The theatre operator uses the boy Sathi to satisfy his sexual desires.

Murugan has personally experienced the uglier face of caste. When he was a child, he had friends from lower caste visiting his house. Murugan says, "People from all walks of life used to come often to our house. This had given me an impression that my mother was not a casteist. But when I married out of my caste, she refused to come out of the house for months."

The chapter brings to light the sufferings of the lower caste people and the cruel treatment meted out to them.

Chapter III: Empowered Versus Subdued Women analyses the women characters of Perumal Murugan. Murugan places more emphasis on the female characters in all his works. His women can be classified into two types: Empowered Women and Subdued Women. He shows 'women of land' as the deciding force, independent, strong willed and empowered. In many of Murugan's households, there are single mothers, who, besides fulfilling their responsibilities at home, work hard in the fields like their male counterparts. Kali's mother and Ponna in *One Part Woman*, Kumaresan's mother in *Pyre*, Marimuthu's grandmother in *Resolve,* though widows, are remarkable women characters of Murugan. Widows are traumatized and treated inhumanely. But they gain their strength from the land and prove their mettle by showing their revolutionary nature. Poonachi, though a goat, is considered a representative of the women of the region. She brings joy and hope to the lives of the people around her and dies for her family. She says, "Can you call it a living when you live without looking at anything but to the ground? . . . If it was your nature to bow down, why would anyone shackle you?" (61).

Murugan also depicts women who are oppressed because of their caste and gender. Kongu society is gender biased. Male children are viewed as inheritors, whereas female children are seen as unnecessary burden. Female infanticide is widespread in the area. In the novel *Resolve,* Marimuthu suffers the effect of female infanticide and sex selective abortions. He remains a bachelor in his thirties because of the lack of women in his community. Saroja of *Pyre*, Belly and Stumpleg of *Seasons of the Palm*, Ramayi of *Rising Heat* are all subdued women. They are from lower caste and they suffer for their caste and gender. The landlords of the farm where Belly and Stumpleg work abuse them. Ramayi of *Rising Heat* is forced to prostitution

because of her husband and family. Selvan, on witnessing Ramayi's state cries, "Are you the leaf that the bottom- feeders lick the leftovers from? Are you in so much poverty?"(178). The chapter describes the status of women.

Chapter IV: Establishing Good Rapport for Life Enhancement throws light on the universal fact that humanity is the only way to cure the society infected with the disease of caste discrimination. H.J.Blackham, a British Humanist Philosopher defines Humanism as "the concept focusing on improving the social conditions of humanity by increasing the autonomy and dignity of all humans." Murugan's works not only depict the filth, suffering, and repression of the society, but also display how admirable and encouraging relationships contribute to the betterment of the society. *Seasons of the Palm* depicts a supportive relationship between the worker and his master where Shorty's master assumes a paternal role. Though he shows his casteist pride at times, he teaches Shorty the cultivation of palm, lets him befriend his son Selvan, and corrects him when he makes mistakes by either being patient or by punishing him. In turn, Shorty helps his son Selvan during challenging times. "Selvan drops the lamb into Shorty's lap and puts his hands around his shoulders. He howls and weeps. Louder and louder. Sobs rack his stricken and cold body. Shorty hugs Selvan to himself… Selvan cries even more and buries his head in Shorty's lap" (164).

Murugan also highlights the relationship that exists between parents and children that helps the children to succeed. He beautifully captures the relationship between the son and his father in *Estuary*. Numerous instances of friendship have developed, despite caste and economic disparities. The friendship between Raman and Marimuthu in *Resolve*, the friendship between Kumaresan and soda Bhai, and the friendship among children in *Seasons of the Palm* and *Current Show* are examples. Kumaresan says, "Caste! Which caste is soda Bhai from? Wasn't he

the one who offered me the job? . . . Which man from my caste came to my aid? (176). Murugan shows how the connection and love between Saroja and Kumresan in *Pyre* and Marimuthu and his lower caste wife in *Resolve*, help in breaking down the wall of caste.

The most important bond Murugan describes is the unbreakable connection rural folks have with nature which gives them the fortitude to face the challenges of life. They derive their sustenance from the land, which nourishes and binds them, fostering harmony, and imparting the lessons of life. Murugan's works contain symbolic references to nature using symbols like goats, wells, and palm trees. All his symbols are juxtaposed. Palm trees represent the mental strength to resist and endure adversity. They are used to convey both loneliness and unity. Wells provide consolation and solace, while goats are benevolent and revolutionary. The bonds that Murugan exhibits are quite remarkable in that, they are comparable to the bonds that enabled him to recover and live again. He was able to deal with the issues that arose after his inter caste marriage and resurrect himself after the exile due to the controversy that ensued the publication of *One Part Woman*. In his poetry collection *Songs of a Coward*, he expresses the trauma he has undergone at the time of exile and the process of his convalescing with the support of his friends and family. As per the philosophy of Humanism, Murugan's characters strive hard to claim their rights, progress in their lives and try to make the world a better place to live in with the bonds they create. The Chapter focuses on how the power of love helps people transcend the obstacles in human life.

Chapter V: Summation sums up the important points of the three main chapters and reiterates the need for connection and communication in human life. In his native land, Murugan serves as the voice of the oppressed providing a clear picture of the Kongu society from all perspectives – the geographical, social, religious and even the rural politics. Basically, the

characters of Murugan live in darkness away from the fantasies of the world. His novels echo their continuous cry for freedom, equality and love. From Tallfellow of *Seasons of the Palm* to Sathi of *Current Show*, in spite of the differences in the place they live, the work they do and the situations they face, they come together in their longing for human compassion and quest for freedom. Murugan says, "We must resist anything that divides us." He wants people to be in harmony overcoming the discriminations of caste and gender, so that better relationships will be established, bringing about the desired transformation.

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